GOD'S GENTLE SHOVE
Genesis 2:4-9, 3:22-24
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Each of us has been put out of Eden at one time or another and it's a good thing, too. Because the process of leaving paradise is absolutely essential if you and I are ever to become fully human beings. It is not usually a voluntary process. Fortunately, it is guided by very wise people who love us so much they know that our identity depends on our moving away from them.

The first sojourn outside of Eden happens modestly, but universally. A small child is brought to church school, or pre-school and to his or her utter amazement and horror, left alone. Mommy and Daddy walk away. Ordinarily it doesn't amount to much, a few tears perhaps, a temporary feeling of abandonment. But it doesn't last. It is the first and very important step away from Eden's total security.

The process continues through childhood and into adolescense when pressure generating from within the relationship increases and occasionally erupts and everyone knows that the time has come. God has made us that way, and as we walk through it, parents and young people, we need to remember that the awkwardness of adolescence and the stress and strain on what used to be such a comfortable relationship are all totally normal and totally necessary. Between 18 and 21, most of us left Eden for good, or in some cases, were pushed out of paradise. I recall it well; the excitement and frantic preparing, the constant reassurance that the future was a grand adventure, and then the September day, late in the afternoon and the 1951 Dodge sedan rounded the corner with my smiling family waving goodbye, and there I was, on the campus of a college I had never seen before, standing well outside the safe and secure paradise of childhood.

Either in a series of events or in one grand cataclysm, each of us, was escorted, ushered, or unceremoniously kicked out of Eden. Sometimes we tried to get back in. Sometimes we were so heartbroken over our lost paradise that we tried to return, and, if we were lucky, we ran directly into a firm but gentle hand that stopped us and turned us around and pushed us back out again. We've all been kicked out of Eden and there's a sense in which the process never ends. Long gone, of course, are the days when it occurred within the context of our parent-child relationship. Now it happens in a series of life tasks: marrying and beginning new jobs and changing vocations and having children and moving to new communities. Now it happens when we leave old securities behind and step into new ventures which require a bit of bravery and innovation and a willingness to be independent. Eden represents security - total security. Part of the fascinating truth about us is that while it may be paradise full human life is not possible within its boundaries.

The story is a rare and precious gem. God has formed a man from the dust of the ground, breathed His own breath into him and for the man's comfort and providence and security planted a garden in Eden and placed the man in it. Everything the man needed was in that garden: all the beauty his eyes could behold, lovely flowers, lush green trees, shade from the sun, and all the good food he would ever require. And one tree from which the man was forbidden to eat. What else could he want? When he got lonely in his magnificent garden, God gave him other creatures for company and entertainment and comfort. And when that did not assuage his aloneness, God gave him romance in the form of a woman he formed from man's rib.

And then, things begin to unravel. One of the creatures tempts the woman who tempts the man who eats the fruit of the forbidden tree and with the first bite innocence disappears and the man and woman scurry around to hide their nakedness. Their Creator, strolling in the garden, finds the guilty pair, knows immediately that everything has now changed and escorts them out of the garden. The mood is wistful, not angry; almost reluctant. That is so good, so subtle, we rarely hear it, I think. We get so caught up in the trivial concerns of the

literalists, that we rarely hear this ancient brilliance. God is not particularly angry in this saga. He is parental: that is, He is sad that this experiment in Eden has not worked. Wistfully He leads the man and woman out of the garden, "To till the ground from which He had made them": like a sad but knowing mother or father walking little children to kindergarten on the first day of school.

The truth of that story does not have to do with biology and anthropology. It has to do rather with an amazingly accurate assessment of the human condition. No less an authority than the Wall Street Journal once editorialized: "Nothing the behavioralist psychologists have discovered in their rat mazes, will tell you as much about human nature as the Judeo-Christian view of man - created in God's image but marred by original sin." (Carnegie Samuel Calian, The Gospel According to the Wall Street Journal, p.26, W.S.J., 5/23/68).

The theme is powerfully represented in modern literature as well, particularly in John Steinbeck's 1952 novel, East of Eden, which will be telecast three nights this week. Steinbeck himself wrote: "I believe there is only one story in the world, and only one... Humans are caught in their lives, in their thoughts, in their hungers and ambitions, in their avarice and cruelty, and in their kindness and generosity too, in a net of good and evil." (Cultural Information Service, Viewer's Guide, East of Eden, ABC-TV).

The traditional way to interpret our primal story is that human sin angered God who responded by ejecting His man and woman from Eden...Paradise lost. In this sense, life outside the garden, particularly that tilling the soil business, is essentially punishment for sin. May I suggest an alternate interpretation which makes more sense to me? Full human life is only possible outside paradise. Full humanity is not the security of Eden, with all its beauty and lush fruit to eat. Humanity has to do with plowing the soil and planting and worrying and praying for rain and cursing when it doesn't come and loving and laughing and weeping and dying. That, I would submit, is the real genius here.

We know that human growth is away from dependence on parents. Swiss psychiatrist and theologian Paul Tournier is one of many Christian scholars who have commented on the subject. He writes: "The father symbolizes power, the power on which we depend at first in infancy, and against which we measure ourselves in adolescence. Its absence means first insecurity, and then the lack of asserting oneself against it." (The Violence Within, p.140). Tournier was arguing that the loss of one or both parents is a very powerful influence in the way the person lives the rest of life, particularly in respect to the "Will to Power". He cites a fascinating study by a French physician of world leaders - who were in some way orphans: those who lost fathers before 8, like Louis XIV, Queen Victoria, and William the Conqueror; before 15 like George Washington and Joseph Stalin; before 20 like Napoleon, F.D.R., and Caesar; those who lost mothers like Lincoln, the Buddha, and Descartes; complete orphans like Adolph Hitler; those who rejected their own fathers like Richard Nixon and Alexander the Great; those abandoned by their fathers like Winston Churchill and Indira Ghandi; and those who were illegitimate like Fidel Castro, Juan and Eva Peron.

There is no more powerful dynamic in human development than the relationship with one's parents. And within that dynamic, nothing is more critical than the way in which the person moves away from the paradise of parental security into the frightening world of independence, autonomy, and wholeness. What the Genesis 2 story suggests is that the same dynamic is true spiritually. Spiritual growth is not away from God, of course, but there the metaphor breaks down. Growth into human wholeness, independence, autonomy. Spiritual growth is not well represented by the piety that consults God on every trivial matter that comes along, but rather the maturity which thanks God for the skills, abilities, and resources He has given and then makes decision and proceeds with life.

The late Reinhold Niebuhr wrote, "The chief source of human dignity is man's essential freedom and capacity for self-determination." (The Nature and Destiny of Man, in Viewer's Guide, op.sit.). The purpose of religion, that is to say, is to reinforce our humanity,

our autonomy, not to make us more dependent. That is what Bonhoeffer meant in his often quoted phrase, "Man come of age". God, he believed, wants us to become big enough to responsibly exert the authority He has given us. His will for us is not that we remain weak, dependent children - but strong, mature, independent adults. The Christian Century carried a poem recently that said it poignantly. The author, Al Carmines, titled it simply "Aneurisms" which suggests the situation which inspired him...

"I have had an aneurism
Pills, therapy, regimen
Things foreign to my nature
To my old nature, that is.
For having an aneurism is a bit
Like a new brain at work inside you.
When God expelled Adam after the fall
There was a new nature at work in him, too.
Mama could no longer solve everything.
And so terrified we move into the scary world
Fortified by a wife or a pill or therapy of a new regimen.
God pushes us like a mother bird from the nest
And we keep attempting to return
Only to meet the firm but loving push.
Did God's heart break as he saw Adam trying to make it alone?
My heart breaks as I try to make it alone.
But I hear a voice in the far distance saying
'All must make it, All must take it,
There's a song to sing
About everything
You're facing now,
So sing, sing, sing.'
And I sing my song.
Adam, did you discover music as a result of the fall
And the aloneness you discovered within yourself?
I think so, Oh, yes, I think so." (Al Carmines, The Christian Century).

"...God pushes us like a mother bird from the nest, and we keep attempting to return... only to meet the firm but loving push..."

God wants us out of the nest, out of Eden, out in the world. How tragic, how wrong, that so much of our religion seems predicated on the very opposite assumption and moves in the opposite direction. Psychiatry often looks suspiciously at religion - precisely because religion often fosters dependency relationships rather than encouraging independence. Part of the appeal and the danger of cult religion is in the strong leader, the father figure to whom adherents give total allegiance and who, in turn, provides safety and security by doing the thinking and deciding for all the members. It is no coincidence that many of the more rigid and extreme cults see themselves as a kind of family, and the leader as the common parent. Marney: Western man or X chow

The shame is that right religion can be a resource for personal freedom. Healthy religion never masquerades as a security blanket to protect believers from all the dangers of the world, but rather sends people into the world in freedom and responsibility. Genesis 2 proposes that human life is lived outside the Garden of Eden. And that our vocation in life is to learn how to live it fully and responsibly, not to spend our years trying to discover a way to sneak back in. The life God wants us to live is outside, where everything is differen out in the world with all its ambiguity and tragedy: out in the world where sin, for instance is a reality. Inside the garden the atmosphere is placidly perfect. Outside there is fratricide, jealousy, mistakes happen, wars occur, but something else is out there as well; namely, the possibility of responsibly human morality. In a book describing her religion Helen Keller wrote, "We cannot freely and wisely choose the right way for ourselves unless we know both good and evil." (Op.cit.).

human greatness + glory —
Ian Steinbeck —
St. Paul —

Shoved outside their garden paradise primal man and woman made another disturbing discovery - their own mortality. Inside Eden immortality reigns. Outside, people get old and die. A shame it seems, and yet we do understand on occasion that if life never ended there would be no joy. Abraham Maslow was recuperating from a severe heart attack and wrote in a letter to a friend, "The confrontation with death - and the reprieve from it - makes everything look so precious, so sacred, so beautiful that I feel more strongly than ever the impulse to love it, to embrace it, and to let myself be overwhelmed by it. My river has never looked so beautiful...Death, and its ever present possibility makes love, passionate love, more possible. I wonder if we could love passionately, if ecstacy would be possible at all, if we knew we'd never die." (Rollo May, Love and Will, p.99).

Paul + Barth here

By the same logic, life outside Eden is where God and therefore the life of faith is possible. Sometimes we know God by His terrible absence. Sometimes we are driven to confess that the most compelling evidence of His existence is our gnawing hunger for Him, our sense of His absence. Sometimes the tumor is malignant, the surgery unsuccessful, the heart attack fatal; sometimes the dream shatters into pathetic fragments and we find words which sound devastatingly like words another used one day, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" People talk like that outside Eden, and there - or here rather - this side of paradise, is where the God we know by His absence comes to be with us, and where mature faith is called out of us.

leave his own Eden + call

One time a Palestinian Jew, son of a carpenter, walked among His people. He knew this story too. Among the other customs and tales and rituals of His people's religion Jesus of Nazareth knew the one about God and the man He formed from dust and the woman and how they left their garden paradise. Part of what Jesus did was call people out of an old and quite comfortable religious situation. Part of what He did was invite people to leave old securities behind and to walk into the world following Him - as newly created men and women - more mature, stronger, healthier than they had ever been before. Part of following Him today is the same. He invites you out of your safe garden. In recent years He has asked us to leave behind some old securities we had used for years, comfortable stereotypes about race, and sex, and He continues to ask us to let go of secure ideas about justice and peace and the way to be faithful to it. And He may on occasion call you to new relationships, new tasks to do, new battles to be fought.

Barth- Grace - in tough time

God, the ancient story writer perceived, is not completely described as the parent to whom we flee when the going gets tough. He is that, of course, but He is also in the business of pushing people out of Eden and into His world. His call, I would suggest, His intrusion into your life and mine, may be like nothing so much as a firm but gentle shove. The promise is that in pushing us out of the garden He is giving us full and new life. In fact, His Son called it salvation.

Amen.

Eternal God, we turn to you for comfort and strength in times of need. Help us to know You as the gentle push into the world as well; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.